

CHAPTER FOUR

Ritual Structure

I. THE CHARACTER OF RELIGION

771 **A** TEXT-BOOK knowledge of the religious lore of India, and an acquaintance with her ancient classics and their modern expositions will hardly give us a true picture of the actual religious beliefs, thoughts, feelings and practices of the people now living in the countryside. A classification of their religious beliefs and ritual is not an easy task. Folklore and myths, religious teachings of saint-poets, and contacts with persons having knowledge of scriptures and popular religious books have all influenced their religious ideology, and consequently their religion is a mixture of animism, animatism and polytheism, with the occasional appearance of monotheism also. To these must be added a living faith in spirits, ghosts, demons, witches and magic. The complex of all these diverse factors constitutes the picture of the supernatural world as it is understood by the people in the countryside. Tenets of classical Hinduism having an all-India spread are mingled with the regional religious beliefs and forms of worship current among the Hindus of the Deccan plateau. Several cults and worships of a purely local nature add further to the complexity of the beliefs and ritual system of the community. A wide variety of cults is observed by the family, some by the village as a whole; and still others by individual caste groups.

771 What is the attitude of the individual towards religion in
779 general? And what is his attitude towards the rituals and cults organized by the different units of the community? An attempt to answer these questions will greatly help our understanding of the character of religion as accepted and practised by the people.

Shamirpet is predominantly a Hindu village. The Muslim sec-

RITUAL STRUCTURE

The Muslim section of the population belongs to the Sunni sect and follows the religious pattern laid down in the Koran as interpreted by the founders of this sect. A devout Muslim is expected to offer prayers five times a day. In Shamirpet this would be the exception rather than the general rule. Some of the Muslim elders offer prayers twice a day, some only once and the rest are contented with their weekly prayers on Friday. The Mulla, the Muslim priest in the village, is the only person who offers the prescribed prayers every day. Fasting during the month of Ramzan is undertaken by a very large number of Muslims, but those maintaining it without a break until the end of the month would not total even a quarter of that number. The Muslims have a high degree of community-consciousness, but in Shamirpet it does not find expression in the form of intense religious devotion among the adherents of the Islamic faith.

With the exception of the Brahmin and the Komti castes, the Hindus have no fixed time for daily worship. The number of people who visit a temple or shrine every day is negligible. But festivals and ceremonies are observed with unfailing regularity. Otherwise the gods are remembered only at times of disease or difficulty. As a rule, only some of the elderly people devote themselves to 'the daily duty of remembering the creator'; the younger people 'have much else to do'. They participate in ceremonies, partake of the festival feasts, and assemble to listen to the reading of the holy books and to the recitation of mythological legends by professionals when they happen to visit the village. The tasks of remembrance and repentance are postponed for old age. Among both men and women, only the elders seem to talk about 'the change of times' and 'the decline in the religious attitudes and ethical standards of the people'. In the everyday thought and speech of the younger generation there is very little of religion; and little conscious effort at seeking any deep religious experience or thrill is to be found among them. In the life of the community under observation, we noticed only two exceptions to this. One of these is the *Urs*, a semi-religious fair, commemorating Jalal Miyan, a local Muslim divine with some reputation for being a holy man. This fair is sponsored by the Muslims but is largely attended by the Hindus also. The second is the annual worship of a village goddess organized by the village. On both these occasions several people are temporarily possessed by the spirit

RITUAL STRUCTURE

771 of Jalal Miyan or by one of the goddesses. Going into a trance
 796 these people speak for the spirit which possesses them. The other
 787 people who are present there make offerings to them, seek solutions of their pressing problems and difficulties, and request them to remedy their ills and worries. Considerable enthusiasm is in evidence among them at this time. With these exceptions there is very little religious thought, talk or worship in normal life.

779 However, both Hindus and Muslims have a degree of fatalism
 777 and demonstrate a spirit of resignation towards predestined facts
 776 ordained for them by the supernatural forces of the world beyond. People can often be heard to remark, 'If it is written in our fate, we must submit to it. Human effort cannot alter the will of God. What is predestined must have its course.' But this fatalism makes its appearance only when the people have tried their best to solve the problem and having spared no effort still find themselves no nearer a solution. Coupled with this concept of fate is the Hindu doctrine of *karma*. According to this concept, which takes for granted the phenomenon of the transmigration of the soul and its re-birth, our actions in the past life determine the character of our present life, and our actions in this life will determine the character of our future life. The village people clearly reconcile and synthesize these two views into a practical precept: the course of our present life is largely predestined on the basis of our acts in the past life, but by acting 'rightly' in this life we can materially influence the course of our life after death.

779 The rural ethic lays great emphasis on 'acting rightly', that is
 775 on the observance of traditional norms; because it is the only way
 772 to achieve happiness and prosperity in this life, and more than that to ensure the destiny of the soul after death. The problem of the future plays a very significant part in the ordering of life. Both Hindus and Muslims believe that death is not the end; there is something beyond it. Both attach great importance to the destiny of the soul after death. While the Muslim expects to remain in his grave until the Resurrection, when on the Day of Judgement he will be assigned to heaven (*jannat*) or hell (*jahannum*) according to his deeds, for the Hindu life is practically an unending process. After death one either goes to heaven (*swarga*) or to hell (*narka*), or one takes re-birth. Depending on one's actions in the past life, one may be born into one of the castes higher or lower than one's caste in the previous life, or even into some other lower species

RITUAL STRUCTURE

of the animal kingdom. One should therefore endeavour to go to heaven or to secure re-birth in a respectable caste and good family. In the course of our investigations we found very few people who had even a hazy notion regarding the higher Hindu concept of *moksha* or salvation which secures the emancipation of the soul from all worldly obligations and ensures that it shall cease to take birth again and again in different shapes and forms. But the desire to go to heaven or to ensure a better birth is universal. From one's childhood, one keeps on hearing, often colourful and dramatic, accounts of heaven and hell. 'We shall have to account for our actions before God. We can deceive our family, our village, our caste, and even the established authority, but we can never deceive God. He has the record of every little thing that we do, and after death His agents will decide whether we go to heaven or to hell', is the refrain in the talk of most of the people when they are asked to explain their belief regarding the future of man after death. Descriptions of heaven and hell are vivid and imaginative. 'In heaven you have only to desire a thing and the next moment you find it there', said one of our informants. 'There is peace and plenty in heaven. All people live in luxurious palaces where an army of countless servants looks after all their comforts. There you have the choicest foods, and the best of everything,' explained a Reddi cultivator. A Madiga's picture of heaven was somewhat different. He said, 'When you go to heaven you have a comfortable house fitted with chairs, soft beds and velvet cushions. And you get all the rice that you want to eat, and all the sweets. And you can do what you like for there are no administrative or village officials to curse you and abuse you.' The descriptions of hell are fairly standardized. 'Hell is an awful place. It has several compartments, each one worse than the other. In one compartment roaring fires are kept eternally burning, in another there are deadly snakes, scorpions and crocodiles; then there is a large tank—several miles long—filled with pus and foul-smelling blood, swarming with maggots and hideous insects; and there are hundreds and hundreds of such compartments each with a different torture and punishment awaiting the sinners. According to the nature of their sins, wrong-doers are thrown into one of these sections to suffer the penalties for what they have done. They cry and scream and weep, but the warders in God's prison are merciless. The more the sinners cry, the more they are tortured.' The

RITUAL STRUCTURE

779 above account represents a fairly typical description of hell which
 775 one often hears in the village community. Through conversation,
 772 folktale, myth and legend these ideas are implanted fairly
 early into the minds of the village children, who start life with a
 fear of sin. But by the time they reach the age of undertaking wild
 adventures these fears are diluted, and the gruesome accounts of
 hell no longer hold their spell of horror over them. As old age
 approaches, bitter memories of failures and frustrations accumu-
 late and the flesh does not have the energy to undertake fresh
 adventures; people slowly begin turning their attention to
 thoughts of life after death. As an illiterate informant pithily put
 it: 'While youth lasts, passions rule the actions of man. While
 property lasts, the glitter of gold makes a man blind. But in old
 age, man laments for what he did in his youth. With his dim vision,
 he can no longer see the maddening glitter of gold. Then his
 thoughts turn to religion.'

777 The concept of *dharma* is also important, as it covers all the
 778 phases of the human life-cycle and fixes several details of intra-
 and inter-group life. *Dharma* has often been translated by Western
 writers as 'religion', but this translation hardly conveys the origi-
 nal meaning. It will perhaps be more appropriate to describe it
 as 'the way of life' or 'that which is right'. Acceptance of caste
 traditions and the general rules of piety, observance of fasts and
 feasts, rigidly following the norms governing the *rites de passage*
 and undertaking pilgrimages to places of worship or for bathing
 in holy rivers, can generally be said to constitute the *dharma* of the
 people. Special worship and rituals may be performed to attain
 certain special ends. It is through *dharma* that one can look for-
 783 ward to shaping one's destiny. The concepts of *pap* (sin) and *punya*
 (673) (merit), and of ritual pollution are fundamental to the wider con-
 cept of *dharma*. Certain things must not be done by any member
 of the community irrespective of his caste because they are sinful.
 Murder, extreme cruelty and violence, and incest can be placed
 under this category. There are certain other things which must
 not be done by certain castes, or by certain individuals in par-
 ticular conditions. Sexual relations or inter-dining with a person
 of lower caste will lead to impurity. A woman in menses or a
 family immediately after childbirth and death remains in a state
 of ritual impurity for a specified period. After certain bodily
 excretions such as those of faeces, urine or semen, a prescribed

RITUAL STRUCTURE

bath or wash is necessary to remove the impurity caused by the act. Non-observance of these rules will have a polluting effect; and according to the nature and degree of pollution purificatory rites will have to be undertaken. 793

Belief in ghosts and spirits is universal. They are feared and propitiated. Strange mystical power pervading certain objects is recognized, and fetishes and amulets are eagerly sought. Witchcraft is often suspected, and three or four people in the community are believed to possess magical powers. 771 070 050

Clearly, Hinduism as it is practised in the village is not the Hinduism of the classical philosophical systems of India, for it possesses neither the metaphysical heights nor the abstract content of the latter. It is a religion of fasts, feasts and festivals, in which prescribed rituals cover all the major crises of life. Worship and propitiation of gods and spirits follow the annual round of festivals and the ritual of the human life-cycle. Disease and difficulty may also necessitate invoking assistance from these sources.

In early childhood religious instruction through legendary tales and anecdotes exercises its influence on the developing mind of the child in whose thoughts and world of fancy these ideas linger on. Youth brings in its wake a more worldly and materialistic outlook towards life and its pleasures. Thoughts are turned to religion when the evening of life approaches, partly to postpone the final moment of departure as long as it could be, and partly to ensure the future lying beyond the point of death. Analysis of life-histories reveals that spiritualism cannot be said to be the keynote in the life of the community; far from it the religion appears to be a practical one. It strengthens and fortifies the individual and the group in situations where technical competence and practical intelligence are of no avail, and at the same time acts as a bond of cohesion for maintaining the structural unity of the society. 869 771

2. BELIEF: GODS AND DEITIES

The Muslims believe in one God, and follow the way of life laid down for them by their Prophet. They all belong to the Sunni division, and as such differ from the Shias and other splinter divisions of Islam in respect of the interpretation of their holy book as well as in several details of belief, ritual and ceremonial. Almost all the Muslims of Shamirpet have been converted to Islam from 777 795 776 797

Hinduism in the course of the last four or five generations.

RITUAL STRUCTURE

795 Hinduism in the course of the last four or five generations. They
 776 do not believe in any of the gods of the Hindu Trinity, nor in any
 of the later incarnations; but they share with the Hindus a living
 faith in the existence of malevolent ghosts, spirits and witches.
 [621] They participate with the rest of the community in village cere-
 monies and sacrifices. To ward off cholera, plague and smallpox,
 they too think that it is necessary to propitiate the local deities
 and goddesses.

799 Village Hinduism is not easy to describe. It is an extremely
 184 elastic religion, and within its all-India framework admits of a
 614 considerable degree of regional and local variation. In his *Religion
 and Society among the Coorgs of South India*, M. N. Srinivas has
 introduced the useful concept of 'spread', and split up village
 Hinduism into 'All India Hinduism', 'Peninsular Hinduism',
 'Regional Hinduism', and 'Local Hinduism'.

796 The people of Shamirpet worship all the major gods of the
 171 Hindu pantheon, but many of their cults distinctly belong to the
 complex of ritual that can be regarded as peculiar to peninsular
 India. Some of these observances present variations which are
 confined only to this particular village.

The Hindu concept of a Trinity, comprising three manifesta-
 tions of divinity—Brahma, the creator; Vishnu, the sustainer; and
 Shiva, the destroyer—has an all-India spread, and in common
 with the Hindus of the other parts of India the residents of
 Shamirpet principally worship either Shiva, or Vishnu and his
 791 numerous incarnations—particularly Rama and Krishna. The
 171 concepts of soul (*atma*), of the reckoning of an individual's actions
 and their consequences on his present and future life (the concept
 of *karma*), of laying emphasis on the right ordering of life and on
 doing what is just and moral (concept of *dharma*), of heaven and
 hell, and finally of the transmigration of the soul and its re-birth
 also have such an all-India spread; although there are significant
 regional and local variations in their details. Finally, the nature
 of rituals connected with the human life-cycle has been very con-
 siderably influenced by the Sanskrit ritual of all-India Hinduism,
 but it still continues to be characterized by some distinctive
 regional peculiarities.

778 All over India some rivers are regarded as sacred, and legends
 and cults grow around them. The Godavari is among the rivers
 whose sanctity and importance have been enhanced by prominent

CHAPTER SIX

The Levels of Living

I. STATUS DIFFERENTIATION IN THE COMMUNITY

Six major factors contribute towards status differentiation in the village community of Shamirpet. They are:

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- i. Religion and caste.
- ii. Landownership.
- iii. Wealth.
- iv. Position in government service and village organization.
- v. Age.
- vi. Distinctive personality traits.

Religion divides the community into two distinct groups: the Hindus and Muslims, standing out in marked contrast to each other. Hinduism is the older and longer established religion, and the majority of people in the village are Hindus. The Muslim group is largely composed of local converts, drawn from a number of castes—high and low. The Hindus naturally have a feeling of superiority regarding their religious faith and its antiquity, and do not view with favour the indiscriminate mixing of different castes in the Muslim community. But until 1948 they could not express these feelings openly as the Muslims had the backing of the State administration. The State was under Muslim rule, and being of the 'ruling race' the village Muslims were naturally in an advantageous position. They claimed superiority over the Hindus, and tried to dominate the village scene. While practical considerations forced the Hindus to remain silent, the Muslims aggressively denounced them as heathens. It had its reaction: after the Police Action, when Hyderabad was no longer a feudal

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LEVELS OF LIVING

- 779 Muslim State, the Hindus had their revenge by pouring scorn
798 openly on Muslim religion and society. It was now the turn of the
Muslims to observe silence, and tolerate humiliation and insults.
At the time of our investigations, however, most of these passions
had subsided, and no significant tensions were observed. As
[564] groups both Hindus and Muslims regard themselves as superior
in point of religion. From the socio-economic point of view the
Muslims can be regarded as an exclusive caste whose social stand-
ing is roughly equal to that of the agricultural castes.
- 564 Caste as a factor of social differentiation is more significant. It
has been pointed out that in its structure, the caste system has
definitely a hierarchical character. Between the highest and the
lowest castes, there are several intermediate levels. The social
status of a person is largely determined by his caste. The mere fact
of birth in a particular caste gives a good initial start to some and
puts obstacles in the way of others. In a subsequent chapter I
propose to examine some of the stereotypes current in the village
community regarding the qualities and characteristics of different
castes; but notwithstanding these the relative position of the
different castes in the village community is determined by the
traditional scale.
- 554 Religion and caste are more or less fixed and permanent
factors. While change of faith is possible, and under certain cir-
cumstances a person can even descend from one of the higher
castes to the lowest, such changes are very rare. At any rate no one
takes recourse to them to bring about a change in his social status.
- [797] The only case of change of faith recorded by us in the village is
that of the present headmaster of the school who was a Brahmin
to begin with, but later embraced Islam. No case of change of
caste came to our notice.
- 556 In a predominantly agricultural society it is natural to expect that
possession of land and cattle would contribute greatly to an indi-
vidual's social status. Birth into a family of landowners ensures
that a person will grow up to be a respected member of the village
community. Acquisition of land would very materially affect the
social position even of a person of humble birth, and if he does not
behave tactlessly it would greatly enhance his prestige. An un-
touchable Mala peasant is now counted among the influential
cultivators of the village and is given a place of honour in its
councils. He is still an untouchable and would continue to remain